

OCCASIONAL PAPERS  
ON THE HISTORY OF  
BOSTON COLLEGE

BOSTON COLLEGE'S MOVE  
TO CHESTNUT HILL



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Boston College's original building on Harrison Avenue was completed in 1860. It received the first students in September 1864. Between that academic year and the close of the century was a span of thirty-five years, not a long period in the life of an institution or of a collegiate building. Yet in 1900 the realty firm of Meredith and Grew recommended to the then president, Father W. G. Read Mullan three parcels of land, all in the Brighton-Chestnut Hill area — those now occupied by St. Elizabeth's Hospital and Mt. Alvernia Academy plus the University's present central campus — as possible sites for a relocated Boston College.<sup>1</sup>

The archives provide no antecedents to the Meredith and Grew communication. In the absence of documents giving the reasons that led Father Mullan and his advisors to explore an alternate location, we are left to speculate about the reasons. What factors in the Harrison Avenue setting made it inadequate or inappropriate for the College after only thirty-five years?

The most obvious possible explanation is enrollment. The preparatory school and the College were housed in the same building. Were their combined numbers outgrowing available space? This does not

seem to have been the case. Up to 1900 the combined enrollment never reached 500. The year the College moved to Chestnut Hill, 1913, more than a thousand students attended Boston College High School in the former collegiate building. So it is unlikely that a preparatory-collegiate enrollment of under 500 was overcrowding the facilities on Harrison Avenue.<sup>2</sup>

Even if in 1900 the Jesuit Fathers were optimistic about future growth in numbers, they would have had to have second thoughts on that score as the first decade of the new century unfolded. The preparatory division experienced a 14% enrollment decline between 1900 and 1904, from 277 to 238. More ominous was the dip in the college enrollment, from 206 in 1900 to 113 in 1904, a 47% drop. Today an enrollment loss of such proportions would be reason for drastic cutbacks or even the closing of a college. But it doesn't seem to have fazed Boston College's administration, since Father Gasson purchased the Chestnut Hill property in 1907.

Boston College was not unique in the temporary decline in students in the early years of the present century. A table in George Pierson's history of Yale comparing freshman enrollments at Harvard, Yale and Princeton from 1859 to 1937 shows that Harvard and Princeton experienced a drop between 1900 and 1910, while Yale hit a plateau.<sup>3</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison noted this phenomenon in his history of Harvard. Writing of President Eliot's era, he commented: "Enrollment continued to swell until about 1903, when the progressive advance in numbers stopped, with the immediate result of a deficit."<sup>4</sup>

If a crush of students was not a reason for contemplating a new site for the college, what about the dimensions of the campus? We know that Father McElroy had tried to purchase a lot containing 115,000 square feet on Harrison Avenue, an entire block, but an outcry about the "audacious attempt on the part of ecclesiastical authorities to acquire undue and colossal power"<sup>5</sup> led McElroy to make a more modest purchase. The eventual Harrison Avenue site, for the spacious Church of the Immaculate Conception, the faculty residence, and the college building, was 65,000 square feet. The land did not have adequate recreational space, which led Father Timothy Brosnahan, president in the 1890s, to purchase a large but rough tract of land of over 400,000 square feet about a mile from the College on Massachusetts Avenue in Dorchester. The College did not have funds for any elaborate development of this property for athletic or recreational purposes. Parts of it were used as playing fields for a decade. There is no evidence that College authorities ever contemplated erecting buildings at that location. The land was sold during the construction of Gasson Hall to help defray the building costs.

The most illuminating insight as to the attitude of some Jesuits to the Harrison Avenue location is contained in a letter written by Father Gasson in 1928 to Father James Dolan, then president. Father Gasson was giving his recollections concerning a large bequest to the College from a member of a prominent Boston family, a convert who became a Jesuit, Father Edward Holker Welch. The gift was made during Father Brosnahan's presidency,

1894-1898. In the letter Father Gasson remarked: "Father Welch was anxious for Boston College to forge ahead and to emerge from the circumscribed limits of the Harrison Avenue property."<sup>6</sup> Welch, a Harvard graduate, no doubt had more in mind than playing fields in considering the South End property circumscribed. Gasson's ambitious plans for the Chestnut Hill campus only a dozen years later show that people at Boston College were thinking and talking of expanded facilities and property, even though there are no records of such discussions.

Another matter that must have entered into the deliberations of the faculty and administration as the nineteenth century drew to a close was the juxtaposition of the preparatory school and the college on the same property and in the same building. The Jesuits would have been aware of an article published in 1898 in the *Woodstock Letters*, a journal by, for, and about American Jesuits, that criticized the comingling of high school and college students. The Jesuit author wrote: "Some of our colleges, which twenty years ago stood the proud rivals of local colleges and universities, have lost their old prestige on account of the predominance of small boys. Larger boys have told us repeatedly that they would be only too willing to attend our classes were it not that they were ashamed to be seen in the company of so many 'kids'."<sup>7</sup>

In 1900 the president of Georgetown urged the moving of the Jesuit Theologate from Woodstock, Maryland, a rural setting, to Georgetown, adding that should this happen the preparatory division would be abolished. The historian of Georgetown

comments on this proposal: "This was an interesting suggestion. Many had long felt the presence of the 'small boys' on a campus destined for mature university students was a drag on Georgetown's progress."<sup>8</sup> A similar observation is made by the historian of a west coast Jesuit college, Santa Clara, citing an early twentieth century document to the effect that the faculty "resented the intolerable anomaly of a University frequented by boys in Knickerbockers."<sup>9</sup>

It is significant that the *Boston Pilot* of September 10, 1898 in an article on developments at Boston College reported: "The preparatory school of the college, which from its inception enjoyed an unrestrained commingling with the collegiate department, is now confined exclusively to the southern wing of the college, and the college men are located in the northern wing." The following year the college catalogue, which for thirty years had included the names of the teachers and students of the preparatory division along with their curricula, regulations, and prizes, limited itself to data regarding the four college classes. These steps toward the separation of the college from the preparatory division undoubtedly presaged the geographical separation that was to follow.

In 1907 Father Thomas Gasson, who had been a professor of philosophy at Boston College for the preceding twelve years, became president and at once pressed with zeal for a new site and a new vision of academic prestige for the College. The Chestnut Hill property was purchased that year. Gasson Hall was under construction from 1909 to 1913 and the College moved to its new home in September 1913.



The preparatory division and the College both seem to have prospered by the separation. The enrollment of Boston College High School, which had slipped to 238 in 1904 rose to 550 the year of the purchase of the Chestnut Hill property for the College and to double that number the year after the College moved from the South End. To be sure high school attendance was on the rise nationally at that time but state and city records show that between 1900 and 1914 attendance at public high schools in Massachusetts and in the City of Boston just about doubled,<sup>10</sup> whereas Boston College High School's 1914 student body was 5¼ times that of 1900.

At the same time the collegiate enrollment began to swing back. By 1910 it was almost at the 200 mark it had reached in 1900. The first Freshman class of over 100 entered in 1911. The year of the move to Chestnut Hill the student body was 387; three years later it was 578; in 1919 it rose to 697; it reached 900 in 1923; and finally in 1925 it topped a thousand. The enrollment of 1925 was 5½ times that of 1910.

It is ironic that when Father McElroy failed to get clearance to start the College in the North End and purchased the Harrison Avenue property, some of the clergy and laity were upset.<sup>11</sup> They wanted Boston College in the North End where they lived rather than in the South End two and a quarter miles away. Yet a few decades later when the decision was made to move the College out of the City of Boston there is no recorded murmur of protest. Undoubtedly the mid-century concentration of the Irish population in the North End and the core city was a factor in the initial



negative reaction to the South End setting, but transportation may also have been a consideration. The South End was a new development in the 1860s and transportation was just getting organized, although by the mid-80s Dexter Smith's *Cyclopedia of Boston and Vicinity* noted after the entry on Boston College: "Take Norfolk House horse-cars."<sup>12</sup> It was a different story with the Chestnut Hill location. The extension of the streetcar line to Lake Street in the late 'nineties made the campus readily accessible to a commuting student body. One who made the daily trek from South Boston to Chestnut Hill during the College's first four years on the Heights, Father Maurice Dullea of the Boston College Jesuit Community, gives assurance that for him and the other students the longer ride to Newton in comparison to what it would have been to Harrison Avenue was not seen as a burden. The cost was the same, a nickel, and spirits were lifted by what was at the end of the line — a rural setting, a spacious campus, and the imposing tower of Gasson looking down on the then twin reservoirs.

Naturally in the half century between 1864 and 1914 the Catholic population began moving out of the crowded inner city as transportation extended and new neighborhoods developed. Such movement was reflected in the Boston College student body. For instance in 1900 17% of the students lived in the inner city — Boston proper, North End, West End, South End. By 1905 this dropped to 7% and by 1915, when the College was in Newton, to 3%. In 1900 51% of the students came from some part of Boston, 49% from out-

side of Boston. By 1915 the balance was reversed, with 44% from Boston and 56% from outside of Boston. One might think that this shift was due to the move of the College out of Boston, but that does not seem to be the case, since the shift to a majority of non-Boston students took place while the College was still in the South End. For instance in 1905 57% of the students commuting to Harrison Avenue were non-Bostonians.

That the move to Chestnut Hill had very little impact on the geographical origin of Boston College students may be seen by comparing percentages of students coming from selected areas in 1900 and 1915. Percentages afford a readier comparison because actual numbers of students were rising during this period.

**Percentages of Boston College  
Students Coming from  
Selected areas in 1900 and 1915**

	1900	1915
South Boston	3	4
Roxbury	9	9
Dorchester	4	11
Brighton-Allston	1	4
Cambridge	4	11
Somerville	2	4
Newton	4	4
Lawrence	3	2
Lowell	1	3

Despite the more complicated transportation from South Boston, Dorchester, Cambridge, Somerville, and Lowell to Newton as compared to the South End, the percentages of students from those districts increased. Roxbury, the immediate neighbor of the South End, sent the

same proportion of students to Chestnut Hill as it had to Harrison Avenue. The increase of students from the Brighton-Allston area may have been due rather to increase of population there, as in Dorchester, than to proximity, since the proportion of students from Newton did not rise when the College moved to Newton.

As we look back from the vantage point of nearly three quarters of a century to Father Gasson's unhesitating decision to acquire property in Chestnut Hill and locate there an imposing college campus, we applaud his daring and imagination. It would seem that his natural clientele of the time, the Catholic families of the Greater Boston area, had the same reaction, because when the College was relocated, their sons found their way to Gasson's tower on the hill in increasing numbers.

The original arrangement of the buildings at the old Boston College. Photographed sometime before 1875 by Oliver Wendell Holmes.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>David R. Dunigan, S.J., *A History of Boston College* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1947), p. 183.

<sup>2</sup>Enrollment and other student data are taken from the annual Boston College catalogues. Enrollment data for Boston College High School was supplied by the administrative office of the High School.

<sup>3</sup>George Wilson Pierson, *Yale College: An Educational History, 1871-1921* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), Vol. I. p. 723.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 365.

<sup>5</sup>Dunigan, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup>Copy of Father Gasson's letter in Boston College Archives.

<sup>7</sup>*Woodstock Letters*, 1898, 27, No. 2, p. 183.

<sup>8</sup>Joseph T. Durkin, S.J., *Georgetown University: The Middle Years, 1840-1900* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1963), p. 187.

<sup>9</sup>Gerald McKevitt, S.J., *The University of Santa Clara* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), p. 204.

<sup>10</sup>Massachusetts data from *Annual Reports of the Board of Education*, Public Document No. 2. Boston data from *Documents of the School Committee of the City of Boston*, Document No. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Dunigan, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup>Dexter Smith, *Cyclopedia of Boston and Vicinity* (Boston: Cashin and Smith, 1886), p. 48.





